This Week in Bridge

(293) Balanced Hand Slam Bidding

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Level: 2   robert@advinbridge.com

General

When both our and partner's hands are relatively balanced, we are likely to play in a notrump contract and most of the 12 tricks needed to make a small slam are likely to come from honor cards.   We are interested in exploring slam when we have a lot of these cards – usually about 33 HCP. This is the primary method we use for evaluating our hand to determine if we are interested in slam when we hold balanced hands.   But we need more information than just HCP to determine if these balanced hands can take 12 tricks. Here we look at the other concepts and tools that we use to help us determine if slam is a good contract.

Hand Evaluation – Length Points

When we hold a balanced hand (and so does partner) then we do not have a lot of distribution, but we may still have a 5-card suit (or even a 6-card suit if we treat a semi-balanced hand, 6322, as a balanced hand). If our long suit is of decent quality, then we may make slam with fewer than 33 HCP and thus we upgrade our hand by adding length points to it.

Example 1
- +1 point, decent 5-card suit
- +2 points, decent 6-card suit

If our suits are amazing strong in in quality (almost solid) then we may add even more than one point for each of these "extra" cards.

Example 2
AKQJx
This 10 HCP is likely to take 5 tricks (that is almost half the tricks that we need to make a small slam). If we are giving this suit a value, it is worth far more than just 11 total points. Solid suits are difficult to approximate in value, but they are worth much more than the just a decent suit – 12 pts? 13 pts? 14 pts? (more?).

Hand Evaluation – Length Points

If we discover a fit with our balanced hands (like a 4-4 fit after using Stayman) then we may play in suit contract. In a suit contract (unlike in NT) we have the ability to ruff losers. Because we are dealing with two balanced hands there are no singletons or voids in either hand, but some ruffing can be done of our losers that are opposite a doubleton (or even the 4th round of a suit in a side 4-3 fit if it needs to be ruffed.) That means that if we choose to ruff our losers (in the short side) then we may gain some values (a trick or so) by playing in a suit contract.

Example 3

♠ AKJ9   ♠ QT87

♥ Axxx   ♥ Kx

♦ KQJ   ♦ xxx

♣ xx   ♣ AKxx

Though we have only 30 HCP, we have a good chance of making 6♠ if we can ruff two ♣ losers (or two ♥ losers).

Hand Evaluation – Type and Location of Honors

Not all HCP are created equal. We count an Ace as 4 HCP, but it is often better than that; and though we give a Jack 1 HCP, sometimes it is not worth even that. Hands with lots of Aces and Kings are generally better for slam, and hands with lots of Jacks, worse.

Another important part of hand evaluation is the location of our honors. This is particularly true when evaluating the possibility of slam. Generally speaking, hands with HCPs in our long suits or partner's long suits (even 4-card suits can be considered long) take more tricks and hands with HCP in our short suits do not take as many tricks as we expect. This is particularly true for Queens and Jacks – cards that are valuable for setting up later rounds of winners in a suit.

Example 4

♠ AQTxx   ♠ KJ

♥ AQ   ♥ KJTxx

♦ xxx   ♦ Axx

♣ Axx   ♣ xxx

Here we have only 28 HCP, but we have 12 tricks. Our two 5-card suits, our well-located honors in our long suits (Queens, Jacks, and even Tens), and our collection of Aces give us enough playing strength to produce 12 tricks.

When our honors are located in our short suits and these honors do not fit together with partner's long suits, then we may struggle to take 12 tricks event with a large number of HCP.

Example 5

♠ Axxx	♠ Kxxx
♥ KQx	♥ AJx
♦ AK	♦ QJ
♣ Axxx	♣ Qxxx

Here we have 32 HCP, but have only 8 immediate winners, and at most 11 winners, even if every card is exactly where we want it to be.

Number of Aces - Gerber

When we begin to upgrade our hand for length points or shortness points (not just HCP) then it is possible that we could have a combined 33 points and still be missing two Aces.

Example 6

♠ KQJTx	♠ xxx
♥ Ax	♥ KQJx
♦ ATx	♦ KQJ
♣ xxx	♣ KQJ

15 points (14 HCP + 1 length point) and 18 points is 33 total points, enough for slam; but off two Aces, not a good slam. We need to check on the number of Aces.

1NT	4♣
4♠	4NT

The way to avoid this situation is to use Gerber to ask partner for their number of Aces when we want to bid slam, but do not hold many Aces ourselves.

Gerber is our tool in NT auctions (many balanced hands) to ensure that we do not do something silly like bid a slam off two Aces.

Controls in Each Suit

Another time that we may have the points for slam (HCP + length/shortness) but do not want to bid a slam is when we have balanced hands and we are missing both the Ace and King in the same suit.

Example 7

♠ AKxx	♠ QJxx
♥ QJxx	♥ xx
♦ KJ	♦ AQx
♣ AJx	♣ KQxx

Here we have 33 combined HCP, but we do not want to be in a slam because we do not have control of the ♥ suit – the opponents can take the first two ♥ tricks.

Determining if we have control in all the suits is not something we do in every auction (especially if we do not have a fit). When we do have a fit, we may use control-showing cuebids to exchange information with partner about our controls. With a balanced hand, our only types of controls are Aces and Kings (not voids or singletons, which are controls we may have when we have an unbalanced hand). We are generally more aggressive with hands that have a lot of Aces and Kings (have lots of controls) and more conservative when our HCP are largely made up of Queens and Jacks, because this increases the chances that we have two fast losers in a suit.

Conclusion

Though bidding (or exploring) slam with two balanced hands is often easier than with unbalanced hands, it is not as simple as just counting to see if we have 33 HCP. We have many ways to re-evaluate our hand (length, shortness, fit, location of honors, types of honor, etc.) that allow us to use better judgment than just counting HCP. We also have tools (like Gerber and CSC) that help us try to avoid bidding slams that are off two quick losers. Work on both your hand evaluation and your tools of communication with partner to improve your slam bidding on these balanced hand slams.